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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001585

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2014

TAGS: GG PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: GEORGIA ASKS TURKEY TO CLOSE BORDER, FREEZE AJARAN ASSETS; TURKS BALKING

REF: 16 MARCH PASCOE/TEZGOR TELCON

(U) Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Georgian Embassy says GOG asked Turkey March 15 to close its border crossing with Ajara and freeze Ajaran assets. Turks have temporized and probably will not respond positively. Turkish MFA Caucasus DDG Tezgor claims the GOT (1) supports Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) hopes the confrontation can be resolved peacefully; (3) does not like Abashidze, but thinks Ajara should remain autonomous. Tezgor asserts he has "no doubts" Russia supports Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty, and thinks Russia should be consulted about how to resolve the confrontation. End Summary.

GOG Requests Border Closing, Asset Freeze; Turks Temporize

¶12. (C) Georgian DCM Tabatadze told us March 16 the Georgians demarched Turkish MFA DirGen Akinci March 15 to request that Turkey close the Turkey-Ajara border crossing at Sarp. While claiming Turkey fully supports the GOG, Akinci temporized, asking the GOG to send a formal written request to the MFA and merely undertaking to "discuss" the matter once the formal written request arrives. Tabatadze said the formal GOG request is forthcoming. Tabatadze "cannot rule out" the possibility the GOG will send a special envoy to Turkey to reiterate the GOG requests.

¶13. (C) Tabatadze attributes what he characterizes as MFA reluctance on the GOG requests to concern over the possible Russian reaction and to the reaction of Turks in the area who depend on cross border trade. In this regard, as of mid-morning March 16, Russian tanks were occupying the short stretch of road between Batumi and Sarp. At the same time, even if the Turks move to freeze Ajaran assets, Tabatadze doubts they will find much in Turkey.

¶14. (C) Tabatadze said the GOG is having difficulty judging whether the Turkish Consul General in Batumi is playing a helpful role because "we see no results." Turkish FM Gul and PM Zvania spoke by telephone late March 15; Gul asserted that the Batumi CG is "sending messages" that Turkey supports Georgian territorial integrity.

¶15. (C) Tabatadze is also concerned that "nationalist" elements in Turkey (he singled out the National Action Party) may urge Turkish support for Ajaran separatism.

GOT Unlikely to Respond Positively to GOG Requests

¶16. (C) The GOT does not appear inclined to respond positively to the GOG requests. Although he did not admit the GOG requests despite our repeated questions March 16, MFA Caucasus DDG Tezgor several times implied clearly that the GOT considers Saakashvili's call for an economic blockade rash. He expressed concern that a blockade would provoke a chain of events similar to President Gamsakurdia's 1992 blockade of Abkhazia.

¶17. (C) Tezgor claimed the GOT is satisfied the situation is "under control" and continues to observe events. He said Turkey will use its "good offices" to help resolve the situation peacefully, but now is "not the right moment." Tezgor said the GOT will wait for the situation to calm down.

GOT Supports Territorial Integrity and GOG Authority -- Sort Of

¶18. (C) Tezgor asserted the main focus of the GOT approach is to support Georgia's territorial integrity and central

government authority. Asked why the March 15 MFA statement was not more forceful on those points, Tezgor replied the statement is "sufficient for this time." He claimed the GOT is privately "saying many things to both sides."

¶19. (C) Tezgor asserted the GOT does not want Russian troops to compromise Georgia's territorial integrity or sovereignty.

He claimed the GOT has not reiterated this message to the Russians since the confrontation started because the Russians already know the Turkish position. Told of reports of Russian tanks astride roads near Batumi, Tezgor mused that this might have a "deterrent" effect on Saakashvili.

¶10. (C) Tezgor said the GOG and Ajara need to come to an understanding. He criticized Abashidze for governing Ajara like a "kingdom." He acknowledged Abashidze's possible links to criminal activity and said the GOT does not like Abashidze, but argued that Ajara historically has been autonomous. Expressing what he called "pragmatic" concern about what would happen if the GOG tries to take autonomy away from the region, Tezgor averred that autonomy must be maintained. He added that any understanding needs to take the Russian reaction "into consideration."

¶11. (C) Asked how the GOT position on Ajaran autonomy fits with supporting territorial integrity, Tezgor replied that each country is different. Asked what Turkey would do if its President were prevented from entering a Turkish province, Tezgor agreed Saakashvili should be able to enter any part of Georgian territory but asserted that "we need to be patient."

¶12. (C) Although DCM Tabatadze said the GOG will try to enforce a blockade of the Batumi port, Tezgor is unconcerned about possible incidents between GOG vessels and Turkish merchant ships due to the small number of GOG maritime assets.

#### MFA Requests Consultation, Elaboration of U.S. Plan

¶13. (C) Tezgor asked about the U.S. position on the standoff. We said the U.S. is concerned that the situation not escalate into violence and that it be resolved consistent with Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Tezgor speculated the U.S. is planning "in secret"; we said no, we are openly consulting with all major actors to help foster resolution. Tezgor made an "official request" that the U.S. brief him on its plans for resolving the standoff. He also asked that the USG work with Turkey and consult before taking any "steps." He worried that lack of "feedback" from the U.S. is leading Turkey to "take poor decisions." (In ref telcon, DAS Pascoe subsequently discussed U.S. efforts with Tezgor and promised to stay in touch.)

¶14. (C) Tezgor urged the U.S. to cooperate with the Russians in finding a solution. He asserted "no doubt" that Russia supports Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty.

¶15. (C) Comment: DCM Tabatadze has long expressed concern to us at what he sees as a pro-Russian slant in Turkey's Georgia policy. From his side, Tezgor has long been complaining to us that he sees no comprehensive, muscular, long-term U.S. strategy for the Caucasus. In the past six months he has become markedly cagier with us and, more in line with his Russophile colleagues DirGen Akinci and fellow DDG Seben (Russia portfolio), has begun to assert that Russia has an important role to play. At the same time he has expressed keen interest in in-depth consultations on U.S. strategy either in Washington or Ankara. End comment.  
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